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A history lesson: Students experience 'Ellis Island'

Providence Community School students walk in ancestors' shoes at Ellis Island

By NATALIE NEYSA ALUND - nalund@bradenton.com

BRADENTON — The intimidating man who spoke in a foreign tongue inspected Morgan Krikke's paperwork as she sat in the holding area.

"Why have you come to America?" he asked Krikke, who quickly explained she'd traveled from the Netherlands because she needed a job.

"And what will you do here?" the man shot back.



GRANT JEFFERIES/gjefferies@bradenton.com Students prepare to disembark from a ship at Ellis Island as their ancestors may have done generations ago as students at

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"I was a doctor in my country and will find work here," she softly replied.

The man looked Krikke up and down, then handed back her paperwork.

"Welcome home," he said.

The man wasn't a U.S. inspector and Krikke didn't just travel overseas. It was all part of a mock Ellis Island simulation that Krikke, 11, and her kindergarten through sixth-grade Providence Community School classmates participated in at Christ United Methodist Church on 26th Street West.

As part of a history lesson, the private school Tuesday recreated the experience of early 20th century immigrants' entry on the famed New York island — the processing point for immigrants. Since students returned to school Aug. 17, they had learned about their assigned country of origin, why they left their homeland and where they settled in America.

To get a feel of the era, students dressed in circa -1900 immigrant dress and carried bundles of items in knapsacks they thought their ancestors might have brought with them overseas.

"This is a way to bring history to life," said Principal Barry Batson, in character as a New York policeman. "We wanted to make education fun. The word I like to use is 'edu-tainment.' "

Teachers grouped students into first-class and second-class passengers, and, with tickets and

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passports in hand, they boarded a makeshift boat on a stage inside the church's fellowship hall. When the boat pulled into New York Harbor, students cheered as they noticed their fourth-grade teacher Kim Beiler standing with a torch impersonating the Statue of Liberty.

Before disembarking, parent volunteer Martin Vreman spoke to the passengers in Dutch and explained the stations they needed to visit as part of their immigration. He spoke Dutch to confuse the children, as their ancestors likely also were confused when they arrived and heard English.

Bags were checked first, then a medical screening was conducted. From there, passports were inspected and stamped.

The final screening was the grueling one-on-one interview conducted by parent volunteer Leif Olson, whose children Maddy and Xavier attend the school.

At one checkpoint stood Dayton Modderman, 11, who sported a navy blue Dutch "bumpa" hat, similar to the one his great-great-great grandfather Hendrick Sijswerda wore when he traveled here from the Netherlands.

Modderman appeared nervous as he watched Batson — still in police uniform — escort some classmates away for deportation. They didn't have proper credentials.

But at the end of the day, Modderman made it through, like his great-great-great grandfather did nearly a century ago.

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